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RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA PRIORITY 5443
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING PRIORITY 3168
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 3033
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ASHGABAT 000898

C O R R E C T E D C O P Y (PAR 3 CHANGE)

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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: SPECULATING ON A FUTURE SUCCESSION
PROCESS

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Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Ambassador Richard Miles for reasons 1
.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Given the stove-piped sovereign power and authority that seems to be the Turkmen president's alone, there is frequently speculation about what would happen if the current president suddenly died or was assassinated. Since the sitting president is only the second president elected in Turkmenistan since its independence in 1991, and the first president was elected in the unique environment of the Soviet collapse, the transition from former President Niyazov to President Berdimuhammedov in December 2006 provides the best picture of how the next presidential succession might unfold.

There are, however, two possible scenarios for the succession process, and each is equally possible. If, however, the dispersion of gas profits is a significant factor, the second scenario would be more likely. Neither scenario will be transparent.

PREVIOUS SUCCESSION A LITTLE MESSY

¶2. (C) In 2008, a new Constitution and other revised legislation changed the national legal framework for succession. Before Niyazov's death, the Constitution stipulated that the Chairman of the Mejlis (parliament) should be named acting president until an election could be held. (NOTE: In reality, the State Security Council and Cabinet of Ministers did not adhere to this, and arrested the Mejlis chairman, then reportedly nominated Deputy Cabinet Chairman Berdimuhammedov acting president during a joint session. END NOTE.) Interestingly, at the December 26, 2006 Halk Maslahaty meeting where presidential candidates were given final approval, the Constitution was also revised to permit an acting president to run for presidential office, but in 2008 the Constitution was again changed to exclude an acting president from candidacy.

SCENARIO ONE: GOVERNMENT FOLLOWS LEGISLATION

13. (C) According to the current Constitution, in the event the president can no longer perform his duties, the State Security Council should name a deputy cabinet chairman as acting president, and the state should organize an election within two months after an acting president is named. It is unclear who sits on the State Security Council--a body formed in December 2006 for the purpose of smoothing the way for the last succession--but membership seems to include the following: the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Minister of Defense, the Minister of National Security, the Minister of Internal Affairs, the Minister of Justice, the Chief of the State Border Service, the Chief of the Customs Service, the Chief of the Immigration Service, the Chief of the Counternarcotics Service, the Prosecutor General and the Chairman of the Supreme Court. (NOTE: It is unclear whether members of the Security Council and the Cabinet of Ministers actually selected Berdimuhammedov to be acting president on December 21, 2006, as former President Niyazov's death was announced on the same day, allowing little time for debate. Post reporting suggests that Niyazov actually died on December 19, 2006 (06 Ashgabat 1289), and the Security Council did not emerge as a governmental entity or meet until December 21 (06 Ashgabat 1289), which begs the question of who nominated Berdimuhammedov and when. END NOTE.)

14. (C) In the current environment, any of the nine deputy cabinet chairmen would potentially be tapped, but if current legislation is respected, appointment as an acting president would be a short-term experience that would then exclude the person from presidential candidacy. It is more likely, then, that someone would be selected who did not aspire to the presidential office (such as Rashit Meredov) or a person with little political support, to ensure an orderly departure from

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the temporary office when a president is elected. Deputy chairmen such as Hydyr Saparlyev (Education and Health; deputy chairman since March 2007 and senior bureaucrat since 2004), Maysa Yazmuhammedova (Culture; deputy chairman since July 2007 and senior bureaucrat since 2005), or Myratgeldy Akmammedov (Agriculture and Water; deputy chairman since July 2008 and senior bureaucrat since 2005) would be the most likely choices, since they have all been indistinct senior bureaucrats since 2005 and are members of the Mary Teke tribe, which would preclude significant political support from the Ahal Teke-dominated political society in Ashgabat. If chosen as acting president, any of these individuals would be most likely to quickly vacate the office upon the election of a new president.

15. (C) As before, a murky process that ostensibly involves government agencies, ministries, and organizations nominating presidential candidates would unfold in the days following the former president's death. Since a deputy cabinet chairman won the last election, and deputy cabinet chairmen hold the highest, most visibly influential positions in Turkmen government aside from the president, it is probable that the next president to be elected will also be a deputy cabinet chairman. Aside from Cabinet Chairman and Minister for Foreign Affairs Meredov, there are two current chairmen that stand out as potential future successors: Hojamuhammet Muhammedov, Cabinet Chairman for Trade and Textiles and recently named Acting Chief Administrative Officer for the Presidential Apparatus; and Deryageldy Orazov, Cabinet Chairman for Energy, Industry, Construction and Transport. Both are members of the Ahal Teke tribe, and both have experienced meteoric rises to the top levels of government in a fairly short time, which suggests they have the confidence and support of top officials. Muhammedov, for example, managed the Russian bazaar until 2005. He spent two years as deputy and then chairman at the State Commodity Exchange and just four months chairing the Supreme Audit Chamber before his appointment as a deputy cabinet chairman. Deryageldy

Orazov also rocketed upward quickly, from his position as an Ashgabat city district hakim in early 2007, to a three month tenure as chairman of the State Tourism Committee. He spent just one year as Ashgabat city hakim before his deputy chairman appointment in August 2008.

SCENARIO TWO: INNER CIRCLE ELITES CHOOSE SUCCESSOR

¶6. (C) An alternative hypothesis is that succession will unfold according to the priorities of a powerful inner circle of elites who would together choose the next president, in an effort to preserve the status quo as well as their own personal wealth. There is evidence of such elites, and reporting to support the notion that they would want to control the succession process. In the halls of the presidential palace, there were four people in powerful positions at the highest level of government before former President Niyazov died, who still haunt the corridors of power here: Foreign Minister Rashid Meredov, and three members of the Presidential Apparatus who are invisible yet seemingly powerful elites: Presidential Assistants Victor Khramov and Vladimir Umnov, and First Deputy Administrative Officer Aleksandr Zhadan.

¶7. (C) Meredov has long been considered by the diplomatic community and local observers to be a long-time career diplomat, free of corruption and largely excluded from internal elite politics. However, local staff report that the other three individuals have long been rumored to be central players who channel money received through corrupt activities to themselves and to the president. (NOTE: Unlike the president, deputy cabinet chairmen, ministers and other senior officials, these individuals have never been seen in any government meeting or appeared in the newspaper,

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although they each hold official titles. END NOTE.) Based on their historical role as powerful individuals connected with high-level corruption and who likely played a part in the last succession, they would probably be involved again, as least in part to preserve their lucrative positions.

¶8. (C) Previous post reporting suggests that these three men have long been amassing wealth for themselves and for the president, through large-scale corruption at the national level. A December 2007 opposition press article reported that there were rumors that Khramov had organized a scheme to extract a portion of the profits from the country's gas sales to Russia for himself. The article further claimed that the influential Khramov had been the primary proponent of Berdimuhammedov's nomination as acting president. (NOTE: If true, Khramov may have pledged to support Berdimuhammedov if he would leave the gas profit diversion scheme in place. One can also speculate that Berdimuhammedov now receives a cut from the scheme, as Niyazov did. END NOTE.)

¶9. (C) In April 2009, a Turkmen ministry employee told a local post employee that Khramov organized international events in Turkmenistan with the goal of enabling the Presidential Apparatus to take money from the national budget to pay for them, while ordering other ministries to pay for the events' actual costs (Ashgabat 0492). In 2007, an opposition website claimed that Jadan was a "deputy director for Niyazov's business affairs and putative controller of Niyazov's personal fund." (07 Ashgabat 0907) (NOTE: If true, Jadan could also potentially be the primary person managing the state's and the president's personal bank accounts abroad. END NOTE.) In March 2009, the EBRD representative in Turkmenistan expressed the belief that Khramov, Umnov and Jadan were Berdimuhammedov's "closest economic advisors" (Ashgabat 0387).

¶10. (C) COMMENT: With only one presidential succession to study, and that succession marked by the quick revision of national legislation even as it was unfolding, it may be too soon to predict with any confidence how the next succession

will occur or who will rise to the top during the process. The one certainty, however, is that the process will be most deeply affected by elite preferences regarding how energy wealth will be dispersed. Therefore, regardless of the scenario that plays out, little of the succession process will likely be transparent. END COMMENT.
MILES